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ABSTRACT

In contrast to a teacher-dominated literature classroom where authority rests with the one who has the power to grade, a classroom dedicated to cultivating the creative process breaks down the traditional hierarchies (such as theory and practice, text and reader, and organization and improvisation) and concentrates on the needs of the individual student in the context of the group. In such a classroom, the teacher's role is to discern with the students, through their collective responses to literature, the group's perceptions of the text and to relate those perceptions to the collective and subjective frames of reference from which they issue. The teacher functions as an expert in the sense of experience, and yet is just another reader whose interpretations are to be experienced and experimented with in the context of the group. This type of teaching requires students to recognize their act of creating meaning in what they read and demands the reciprocity of each class member to make it work. When a class learns to activate its own power to know and create, it becomes its own authority. (MAI)

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AUTHORIZING AUTHORITY

I

When women, when Blacks, when Indians,
when brutalized and colonized peoples
cry against, interrogate and explode
the rules, the laws, the privileges, the myths
laid down by and for
the men, the whites, the parents, husbands and colonizers
then they no longer authorize, empower, permit by their acceptance
the other's right to command,
his authority.
They no longer abandon their own judgment and experience for these
are the resources of self-definition.
They want to be and are becoming authors, makers, producers, creators.

II

Who knows?

In the classroom, there are at least two instances of authority: the power to grade and the power to know. The first is institutionally grounded and is easily confused with what it must be carefully distinguished from--the power to know.

When the power to know and the power to grade are confused, the teacher-student relationship exists within the context of domination. It becomes a master-disciple relationship. Obedience is demanded to the author, or to a dogma, rather than dedication to the creative process in oneself and in others.

It is I who know, pronounces the master; it is you who know, parrots the disciple. Master and disciple form a couple, with satisfactions for both. When repeated by the disciple, the master's notions no longer appear subjective or idiosyncratic; susceptible to becoming doctrine in the disciple, they attain the status of theory.

CS204 609

Absorbed in the master's theories, the disciple permits himself only to repeat and thus loses himself for himself. In this context, all the disciple's work is authorized; he avoids the risk of opening himself to the charge of error or worse, insignificance. The disciple also avoids a process which might lead to both discovery and self-awareness.

When the master-disciple relationship takes on the garb of institutional power the etymological sense of the word "authority" is lived out concretely--by adding "ity" to author, power radically shifts from one who originates or gives existence to something to one who has the right to enforce obedience. When author becomes authority, producer becomes external imposition. The task of this paper is to suggest ways in which to reauthorize authority, that is, to move toward a valuing of the authoring process, in oneself and with others.

III

What is to be known?

Dewey already clearly defined the traditional opposition,as he maintained the necessity of transcending it. On the one hand, it is argued that subject-matter is what is to be known--the facts and the relations between facts as they have been logically formulated into disciplines, the wisdom of the ages, etc. The teacher's role is to know these facts and to deliver them to the students, to widen and enlarge the student's confused and self-centered life by giving him or her access to the objective universe of truth. Discipline and sugar-coating are the rule. Lessons are to be learned and habits formed.

On the other hand, it is argued that the student's mind and its development are the end of education--the mind conceived not as a passive receptacle to be filled up, but rather as a set of needs and interests, capacities

and experiences to be explored and expanded. The teacher's role is not to give information, but to enhance self-realization, to give the students command of themselves by giving constant play to their powers, tastes, and interests.

IV

What is to be known in the literature classroom is neither the self, nor the text, but the experience of reading, an interaction between texts and readers, an interpretive process in which meaning is both found and made. If all genuine inquiry begins with a felt need, then we may say that in the case of the literature classroom, this desire is: to be a reader. It is this desire which is to be nurtured, respected and interrogated, within an environment or curriculum. What it is to read for each student thus becomes the real and meaningful question: is reading to experience other frames of reference, other cultural worlds, imaginary worlds? Is it to have access to other minds? To evade, to compensate, to <u>be</u> structured? To get emotional gratification, to find one's beliefs disrupted or corroborated?

V

If what is to be nurtured is the felt desire to read, and if what is to be known is the experience and making of meaning--an interaction between texts and readers--then a "banking" concept of education cannot fulfill this project. In the baking mode of education, as Paulo Freire calls it, authority is affirmed when the teacher makes deposits into students whose tasks are limited to sorting, filing, and assuring the teacher his deposit has been made. To read, remember and repeat are the student's functions. If what is to be known is the very process of responding to literature, then

only a response pedagogy--one of inquiry, reciprocity, reflexivity and production--can be adequate to this end.

In this view, the teacher's role is not to deliver to the students a privi_leged interpretation, nor is it to offer up for imitation a traditional way of critically approaching a text. Rather, the teacher's role is to discern with the students, through their responses, the group's perceptions of the text, and to relate these perceptions to the subjective and collective frames of reference from which they issue.

The teacher also serves as a source of expertise. Now the word "expertise" brings along with it dangerous historical baggage for it has long been used by experts to confirm ther power in economics, politics, and technology. "Ask the experts, they will tell us what it's all about!" "Let's have a congressional hearing and have the experts in!" Originally, however, expert derives from experīrī, to attempt or to try, to have experience with attempts. In this sense, the teacher as expert is an experienced person, an experimentor, a historian, one who remembers and has a knowledge of the past. Thus the teacher might be expected to know and share with students how a text was read in different ways at different times and how such readings might have evolved.

The teacher, finally, is another reader, whose interpretations are to be experienced and experimented with. Like the student's, the teacher's responses will be related to his or her individual and group frame of reference. Just as a map can never replace a hike through rocky terrain, so the teacher's interpretations may serve as a guide, they may give direction, but they do not pretend to substitute for the student's immediate, personal experience.

VI

The teacher asks the students-readers to recognize their act of creating meaning and enlists their participation in this constructive and interpretive process. The entire class reads each text. Each reader responds through sharing personal responses. The use of personal responses immediately shifts the classroom emphasis from right-wrong interpretations to the potential value of every reaction and interpretation. And by responding to questions like:

What is this text about?

How does this text make me feel?

What does this situation remind me of?

What are the important words, character or themes in this text?

we come to understand that every interpretation of literature and of social life is the result of a complex process in which ideas, feelings, associations and values each have their relevant influence. By making questions like these the primary focus of the literature classroom, response pedagogy bridges the gap between subject-matter and personal experience.

Each reader shares his or her written response to the particular text with the class, and the class as a whole compares all the responses in order to discover differences and sameness. Here, especially, emerge questions and discussions that center around text-induced behavior, that focus on the ways in which the text creates its readers. Respondents now alter or defend their original perceptions and finally engage in the critical process of creating an interpretation that is seen as the result of a merging of the text with each person's own and what he or she has integrated from others' responses.

I have found in teaching that more often than not, the likenesses and

differences among responses began each of our class discussions. We often discovered in others' responses what we had failed to appreciate in our own. My examples come from a course I recently taught on French women writers. The class was composed of a dozen students, mostly women, some graduate, some undergraduate, including a photographer, a painter, a fiction writer, and several majors in American Studies and in English. The pedagogical model I am suggesting is most easily adapted in a small class such as this one, but there are certainly ways in which to affirm a response pedagogy in larger classes, too, such as creating smaller groups within the class.

Again and again in the group discussions, interpretations were suggested that never would have occurred to us had they not been offered by another reader. From Ellen's reading, for example, emerged an understanding of Beauvoir's She Came to Stay as the author's struggle with anti-maternal feelings and this partially, I think, because she was the only member of the class willing to admit that she identified with the childish and selfish Xavière. Cathleen's desire to read aloud long passages of Violette Le Duc's autobiographical The Bastard made us keenly aware of how Le Duc's prose worked to undermine distinctions we initially wanted to establish between autobiography and first-person narrative, between the factual and the fictional. Susan's acceptance of Renée's ambivalence at the end of Colette's The Vagabond made the novel's conclusion appear mature and realistic in comparison with the easier solutions of the Willy-induced novels. And Debra's interest in Virginia Woolf made us question Beauvoir's call to "action" in The Second Sex; is Beauvoir's recommendation the only way to transcend women's "passive" state, or is it merely a suspicious adoption of male values? By comparing their interpretations with earlier or "classic"

readings of these texts, the class developed a sense of both the historical and cultural bases of its own interpretations.

The relations of teacher and student in response pedagogy are of reciprocity and reflexivity since each member of the class contributes to its organization and continuity. After two weeks in which the class as a whole read and responded to Colette's Claudine Married, three small groups were formed--one on feminist literary criticism, one on psychoanalysis and feminism, one on first-person lesbian narratives. Once a week, each group reported in written and oral form on its work to the whole class. After reading a series of essays on feminist criticism, the criticism group chose to read Beauvoir's The Second Sex and their excited discussions provoked much curiosity among the other groups who then decided to join them. But halfway into The Second Sex a stark consensus emerged: we cannot read further. The feeling was like being at the bottom of a quarry and having chunks of rock hurled down upon you--woman as other, woman as temptress, woman as object, woman as mirror, woman as villain, an endless barrage. We cannot read on. Someone suggested that we turn directly to Beauvoir's novel, while keeping in mind The Second Sex; the new satisfactions and disappointments experienced in reading Beauvoir's novel suggested, among other things, valuable insights into differences between her fiction and her scholarly work. When the curriculum is flexible enough to respond to changing interests and desires in this way--here a text was added, there one dropped--the class learns not only something about a text, but something of its own functioning as well. The class activates its own power to know and to create. It becomes its own authority.

VII

By consciously acknowledging the fact that we bring part of what we are to our reading of a text and that suggestions from others contribute to our creation of an interpretation, we define ourselves as creating subjects. We no longer see ourselves as passive objects to be filled up with handed-down information. This perception is particularly pertinent for black people in a white society, women in a patriarchal system, students in a parental context. We become aware that we construct meaning. And that what was constructed and now is taken as natural, as given, can be de-constructed, reconstructed, changed.

A response pedagogy begins the work of breaking down the repressive hierarchies of the literature classroom: theory/practice, objective/subjective, rational/emotional, text/reader, organization/improvisation, mind/body, detachment/involvement, translation of experience/experience. The outcome of such a pedagogy is a new production, both in the sense of new interpretations and approaches to literature and in the sense of a new community of producers, makers of meaning.

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